

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

February 19, 2021
9:01 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Roger Holland, Chair
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair
Senator Shelley Hughes
Senator Tom Begich

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Peter Micciche

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

PRESENTATION: "NATIONAL LANDSCAPE AND POLICY TRENDS IN EARLY LITERACY" BY TOM KEILY~ SENIOR POLICY ANALYST WITH EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES AND BEN ERWIN~ POLICY RESEARCHER

- HEARD

SENATE BILL NO. 8

"An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to school age eligibility; relating to funding for early education programs; establishing early education programs and a voluntary parent program; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to certification of teachers; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a teacher retention working group; and providing for an effective date."

- HEARD AND HELD

SENATE BILL NO. 42

"An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to course credit for students; relating to annual reports regarding school district performance and school district employees; relating to school age eligibility; relating to funding for early education programs; establishing early education programs and a voluntary parent program; relating to

the duties and powers of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to school operating fund reserves; relating to certification of teachers; relating to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission; relating to a virtual education consortium; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a teacher retention working group; and providing for an effective date."

- SCHEDULED BUT NOT HEARD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 8

SHORT TITLE: PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING

SPONSOR(S): SENATOR(S) BEGICH

01/22/21	(S)	PREFILE RELEASED 1/8/21
01/22/21	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
01/22/21	(S)	EDC, FIN
02/15/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
02/15/21	(S)	Heard & Held
02/15/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
02/19/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

WITNESS REGISTER

JOEL MOORE, State Relations Strategist
Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on policy trends in early literacy.

TOM KEILY, Senior Policy Analyst
Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on policy trends in early literacy.

BEN ERWIN, Policy Researcher
Education Commission of the States
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Presented on policy trends in early literacy.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Provided comments about state efforts with virtual education.

KATIE FRANQUIST, Western Regional Advocacy Director
Excellence in Education in Action (ExcelinEd)
Tallahassee, Florida

POSITION STATEMENT: Stated support for SB 8 and offered to speak on early literacy.

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner
Department of Education and Early Development
Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Spoke in support of SB 8.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[9:01:45 AM](#)

CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:01 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Begich, Hughes, and Chair Holland.

PRESENTATION: "NATIONAL LANDSCAPE AND POLICY TRENDS IN EARLY LITERACY" BY EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES

[9:02:27 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the presentation "National Landscape and Policy Trends in Early Literacy" by Education Commission of the States.

[9:03:15 AM](#)

JOEL MOORE, State Relations Strategist, Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, said that he is the Alaska Liaison for Education Commission of the States (ECS). ECS helps education leaders with issues facing American education. It is a nonpartisan organization that can tell Alaska what the other 49 states are doing. The ECS policy team reviews and compiles summaries of education policies. ECS has a legislation tracking database and tracks and reviews every piece of education legislation introduced around the country. ECS writes policy briefs that are available for free on the ECS website. ECS does not advocate for any specific policy. It helps with background and context.

[9:06:44 AM](#)

TOM KEILY, Senior Policy Analyst, Education Commission of the States, Denver Colorado, said that he and Ben Erwin will present some pre-K considerations based on policy that they have analyzed. They will also look at policy regarding literacy and virtual learning.

9:08:29 AM

At ease

9:10:12 AM

MR. KEILY said that when he talks about pre-K, he is referencing programs that serve three- and four-year-old children, specifically state-funded pre-K programs. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia have state-funded pre-K that served 1.6 million students in 2019. About 1,304 students were served in 2019. That is about 10 percent of the four-year-old population. The map on slide 11 shows the percentage by state of four-year-olds served. There is quite a variation across states of students served in state-funded pre-K.

MR. KEILY showed a graph on slide 12, Effects of Pre-K on Future Learning and Outcomes to illustrate his findings on the effectiveness of pre-K. In 2020 he and a colleagues looked at 15 research studies, which they selected for rigor, on pre-K outcomes across a range of measures. The majority of the studies found for positive effectiveness for students who participated in pre-K programs. There were some negative or null effects, but the overwhelming majority were positive effects. Within the positive effects, there were short-term and long-term effects. Short-term means through the end of pre-K and longer term goes into early elementary school and sometimes through high school graduation.

MR. KEILY showed three general considerations for considering pre-K policy on slide 13: quality pre-K., both process and structural factors contribute to pre-k outcomes; alignment between pre-K and early elementary, aligning curricula to build on the content covered in pre-K has a significant positive effect on achievement in kindergarten; and quality elementary environment, factors such as teacher quality and elementary instruction impact student learning and outcomes beyond pre-k.

9:15:11 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked for an explanation of the term converging effects on slide 12.

MR. KEILY explained that means the effect is either no impact or null impact on pre-K students, relative to each area studied. The effect is neither positive nor negative.

SENATOR HUGHES referenced the graph on slide 12 and asked if these outcomes measure the end of pre-K as students enter kindergarten.

MR. KEILY replied that the full brief on the research is in the list of resources provided to the committee and has more context. The boxes on the right side of the graph are studies that they examined. It is not necessarily a specific statement saying that students could add or subtract better, for example. It is just saying that there is generally a positive effect on student math performance in the future. That could be at the end of pre-K or student performance on math assessments in early elementary. He offered to submit the type of outcomes measured in writing to the committee.

[9:18:24 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH clarified that Mr. Keily is saying that each of those blocks on the graph represents a study which he has reviewed that is looking at various factors.

MR. KEILY added that an orange box represents a convergent effect, which means zero, or a null effect.

SENATOR HUGHES clarified that each box represents a study. The various impacts such as on GPA or graduation may be great, but the box represents one study. She suggested a key for the graph to show that.

MR. KEILY transitioned to early literacy policy across the states and noted that he would put forth some considerations to keep in mind when discussing different components of early literacy policy within states. Early literacy is a continuum, a process of learning, growth, instruction, and supports from pre-K to third grade and beyond.

MR. KEILY explained three general groupings of policy for early literacy: prevention, intervention, and assessment. Policy should engage pre-service and in-service educators to make sure supports are available to them to provide quality instruction and supports to students. The last consideration is equity issues. Not all students are performing at the same level and need different supports to learn early literacy skills.

MR. KEILY explained that assessment is a tool to inform prevention and intervention. Some states have considered retention as a piece of this. Intervention identifies individual needs and provides targeted support to individuals with reading difficulties. States require different types of assessments besides the summative third grade reading assessment. States have different requirements about screeners, diagnostic assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments.

[9:25:21 AM](#)

MR. KEILY said he would highlight three states, not necessarily because they are exemplars but because they illustrate different policy levers. He displayed three general components of Colorado legislation:

Evidence Based K-3 In-Service Teacher Training: each school year K-3 teachers must complete evidence-based training in the teaching of reading.

Individualized Reading Plans: students who demonstrate significant reading deficiencies are required to have an idealized plan that details interventions the student will receive.

Per-pupil Intervention Fund: the state department distributes per pupil funds to districts for allowable intervention services. Services range from purchase or provide approved targeted, evidence based or scientifically based intervention services to summer school literacy program.

MR. KEILY described three aspects of the Mississippi literacy-based promotion act:

Assessments: literacy screening assessments selected by state education agency for districts to implement; all K-3 students must be screened within 30 days of start of school year.

Individualized Learning Plan: intensive reading instruction and intervention must be documented for each student in an individual reading plan.

Pre-service teacher preparation: for initial elementary education licensure, a teacher candidate must earn a passing score on a rigorous test of scientifically-based

reading instruction, intervention and data-based decision-making principles.

MR. KEILY said that Michigan enacted legislation in 2019 around K-3 literacy and described three aspects of the bill:

Pre-Service Literacy Requirements: candidates must complete a course of study in reading instruction, including diagnosis and remediation of reading disabilities.

In-Service: districts can apply for funds to support a literacy coach to assist in designing instruction and interventions; funds can also be used to support PD and training in administering diagnostic screening and interpreting assessment data

Assessment: state education agency-approved assessments must include screening, monitoring and diagnostic assessments. Additionally, districts must assess reading progress at least 3 times per year in K-3; individualized reading plans developed if deficiencies are identified.

[9:30:12 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said he heard Mr. Keily emphasize the relationship to quality pre-K and making sure there was a strong reading program for those kids to move into. Three states have a strong emphasis on giving teachers the support they need so they can do those types of programs. He asked if he was talking about quality pre-K and ensuring that reading proficiency by third grade involves a lot of prep with in-service work with teachers and a lot of support to ensure teachers are teaching at the highest level.

MR. KEILY replied generally speaking, yes. State policy emphasizes that teachers have the supports for continued instruction that can be tailored to individual needs. A lot of pre-service and in-service professional develop gives teachers support to provide quality instruction and intervention for students to support student growth and learning.

SENATOR BEGICH asked what happens if the in-service instruction and teacher supports are not provided and what the outcomes are if there is not a strong reading program with a strong pre-K program.

MR. KEILY responded that in the research he reviewed, the aspects noted by Senator Begich have been present in the programs with positive impacts.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if ECS is tracking how state policies impact long-term outcomes. In Mississippi, teachers have to pass a rigorous test. She asked if that tougher policy is leading to increased achievement and better outcomes compared to other states that don't require that test.

MR. KEILY said ECS researchers have looked at performance generally with National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores. ECS and the field struggle to attribute student growth to one policy. ECS hasn't looked at that specifically. He can see if there are any measures based on that policy change for Mississippi.

9:34:57 AM

At ease

9:35:45 AM

BEN ERWIN, Policy Researcher, Education Commission of the States, Denver, Colorado, said that he would give an overview of state virtual learning policies and efforts to address broadband access, which remains a consistent barrier to virtual learning opportunities. He will focus on state course access programs, like the consortium proposed in SB 42. Virtual schools take a variety of forms and operate in a unique policy context in each state. There are four main types of virtual schools: state-sponsored programs, virtual charter schools, multidistrict virtual schools, and single district virtual schools.

MR. ERWIN said that virtual learning was growing in popularity before the pandemic. In the 2017-2018 school year, full-time virtual students exceeded 300,000 nationally. That same year there were over one million courses enrollments in statewide virtual schools with potentially millions more with other providers. There is an expectation that virtual learning will continue to play a major role in the education landscape post-pandemic. A recent Rand Corporation survey found that a majority of districts will continue to use virtual learning as part of their portfolio of course options for students. With such diverse providers, virtual learning can look drastically different for each student. Increased popularity in this complex landscape of virtual school governance had driven policy makers to work to ensure virtual learning opportunities are effective. Research into virtual school performance is limited and is

largely focused on virtual charter schools. Multiple studies of virtual charter schools have found limited student engagement, high student-to-teacher ratios, and low levels of academic achievement. There is some literature on virtual and blended learning and programs that identify some best practices to address the negative findings of virtual charter schools.

MR. ERWIN said that these best practices include access to technology to ensure students are online and have access to the devices they need. Differentiated approaches that combine synchronous and asynchronous instruction as well as opportunities for interactive activities drive improved student achievement and engagement with virtual instruction. Opportunities for teachers to provide direct feedback or interventions for individual students help to ensure students are making adequate progress through a virtual course. Studies have found that professional development opportunities and planning time to build teacher capacity and support and differentiated curriculum allow for more effective instruction. Studies have indicated that student social and emotional supports as well as peer engagement opportunities are vital to drive student engagement. They provide the opportunities that students may have more readily available in a brick-and mortar-setting.

MR. ERWIN said that to increase access to virtual learning opportunities and improve program quality, there are three key policy components, governance, finance, and student engagement.

MR. ERWIN said he chose three states as examples because they have statewide course access programs, similar to the proposed consortium. He presented some information about Iowa:

The state board must review and approve online course providers annually. State board criteria must ensure that courses are aligned with state standards. The department of education is required to maintain a public list of approved providers.

School districts that offer virtual courses are required to monitor student progress towards course completion and graduation requirements, conduct parent-teacher conferences, and administer state assessments.

MR. ERWIN presented information on Missouri:

Students enrolled in two or more virtual courses must have an individual learning plan developed by a certified teacher.

The department of elementary and secondary education is charged with monitoring student progress and reporting full-time virtual school student performance to the local school district. A school district may decide to alter the course load or terminate a student's enrollment in a virtual school.

School districts pay virtual course providers on a monthly basis, based on student progress and assignment completion.

9:43:39 AM

SENATOR HUGHES observed that the final paragraph on Missouri is fascinating because payment is based on student performance and assignment completion. She asked if Missouri has that provision for brick-and-mortar schools or only for virtual coursework.

MR. ERWIN said he doesn't think it is for brick-and-mortar schools. Through his tracking of virtual school policy, it is becoming increasingly popular to pay virtual course providers based on performance. He will show that for Utah. The Florida virtual school receives funding based on course completions. This policy tries to hold virtual course providers accountable for student performance. It definitely is a trend that he has noticed.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if the course instructors in Missouri are certified teachers also teaching in brick-and-mortar schools or are they contracted instructors.

MR. ERWIN answered that through the course approval process, strictly virtual providers can offer courses if they receive approval. The same is true for school districts. He can't say for certain, but it may be a mix. For certification, some states require virtual school teachers to be certified, but in other states it is less clear.

SENATOR HUGHES stated that she would like to know about any research in any type of school on achievement rates and scores when instructors are paid based on student performance.

MR. ERWIN said he is not sure of any research off the top of his head. The research base is limited and new for virtual schools, but he will look into it.

SENATOR HUGHES clarified that she meant for any school, not just virtual schools.

MR. ERWIN replied that he will look into that.

9:47:18 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND referred to the three states that were highlighted in the presentation, Colorado, Michigan, and [Mississippi]. He asked if these states were spotlighted because they are considered to have an ideal system. He asked if there is any research to show that these programs are working.

MR. ERWIN replied that Mr. Keily could speak to the previous examples for literacy and pre-K. For the virtual school states, the research base is so limited. His tracking shows states trying to deal with what may be perceived as holes in the system or issues with the system. There isn't a research base to show these efforts are effective. States are trying to pass different funding models and student engagement requirements to address issues in their states. He is not highlighting them because they are model systems but as innovative state approaches to try to prioritize virtual school quality.

MR. ERWIN said the Utah information focuses specifically on funding:

Utah funds virtual schools using a course fee schedule depending on subject matter.

Online learning providers receive payment based on course progress and completion. For a full credit online course, the provider receives 25% of the online course fee after the withdrawal period, 25% of the course fee upon completion of the first half of the course and the remaining 50% of the online course fee if the full course is completed within 12 months.

If a student does not complete a course within 12 months online learning providers will still receive 30% of the course fee if the student completes the course before graduation.

MR. ERWIN said that states were forced to build and expand their virtual learning infrastructure overnight in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This rapid development was driven by state

and federal investment, mostly with the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding.

MR. ERWIN presented two examples of how states utilized and leveraged their CARES Act funding to improve virtual learning and access. He presented information on Arizona:

Arizona utilized its GEER [Governor's Emergency Education Relief] fund allocation to support a partnership between the department of education, Arizona State University and the Helios Education Foundation to establish the Arizona Virtual Teacher Institute. The institute provides free professional development for all Arizona educators teaching in hybrid or virtual settings.

9:51:42 AM

MR. ERWIN said that Arkansas represents a common trend in how GEER funding was used:

Arkansas committed a portion of its \$30 million GEER fund allocation to the development of an online learning platform to support the delivery of quality virtual instruction.

MR. ERWIN said that Arkansas was building an online platform from the ground up. A lot of states are in different stages of this process. Virginia and Rhode Island utilized funds to expand existing course access programs. Rhode Island had a focus on advanced coursework, and Virginia expanded to include middle school courses.

MR. ERWIN said that despite this increased investment during the pandemic, the digital divide still remains a major barrier to student access. This divide largely impacts low-income students, rural students, and students of color who may also experience less access to advanced coursework and other academic opportunities. It highlights the importance of addressing the digital divide when pursuing virtual course access programs. Three different divides make up the digital divide with quite a lot of overlap between them. These are availability, affordability, and access to devices. These are broken out to highlight the problems students are facing in order to adequately address the divide. Many state policies address all three. Policy options have focused on leveraging existing resources, developing public-private partnerships with broadband providers, and providing direct funding in various forms.

9:54:42 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked if any state is looking at what Alaska is doing. She and Senator Begich have been working on this for five years as have members of the House. Alaska is a unique state. It is very large with many small, rural schools that have a tough time recruiting and retaining teachers. Legislators are trying to build a platform so that districts could have students enroll in a virtual course with a teacher who specializes in something not available in every district. They want every district to have the opportunity to network in this platform with shared teachers. It would be a statewide platform with districts choosing to be part of the network. Five years ago, New York did a bit between districts, but she was not aware of any statewide system that all districts could participate in. She asked if any state is doing something similar to that proposed model.

MR. ERWIN replied that Tennessee has recently implemented a course access program with a similar model, especially thinking about rural or underserved districts that could not offer certain coursework. He mentioned Rhode Island's focus on advanced coursework to make sure all students have access to that. Virtual Virginia's online learning platform does not allow full-time students. It is only for supplemental coursework with a mix of districts and approved virtual providers. Florida is a statewide virtual school that allows full-time and part-time students as well as course access. That is not offered by districts. The school built its own infrastructure and hires its own educators. He will provide more examples.

SENATOR HUGHES said that she would appreciate that. She is curious about the funding models, such as how to work out the fees between districts.

CHAIR HOLLAND asked if Commissioner Johnson had any comments.

9:58:38 AM

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development (DEED), Juneau, Alaska, said the department is working hard on this type of project. The department just announced to superintendents this week that it extended its partnership with Canvas, the learning management system, through the 22-23 school year. The department is working with teachers to create the Alaska Commons, a place for course development and course review to make sure the courses meet rigor and have an endorsement from the department. That will be available to all school districts. Currently 70,000 students and teachers have a Canvas account. The department continues to

develop and build it. He can provide more information to the committee.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Katie Franquist.

[10:00:14 AM](#)

KATIE FRANQUIST, Western Regional Advocacy Director, Excellence in Education in Action (ExcelinEd), Tallahassee, Florida, said she was online to support SB 8, but would be happy to give an overview of national early literacy policies.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if she was aware of SB 42, which is also early literacy legislation.

MS. FRANQUIST replied the ExcelinEd policy team is reviewing that bill. She added that ExcelinEd is happy to speak about early literary policy and answer any questions about implementation.

SENATOR HUGHES shared that she had the great privilege of attending an ExcelinEd conference, which she found to be one of the best conferences she had ever attended. Everything she heard was relevant. She hoped that Senator Holland as a new chair could participate in one of their conferences. She got concrete, practical takeaways from the conference. That is one of the reasons that the committee is working on this legislation.

SB 8-PRE-K/ELEM ED PROGRAMS/FUNDING; READING

[10:02:26 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 8 "An Act relating to early education programs provided by school districts; relating to school age eligibility; relating to funding for early education programs; establishing early education programs and a voluntary parent program; relating to the duties of the Department of Education and Early Development; relating to certification of teachers; establishing a reading intervention program for public school students enrolled in grades kindergarten through three; establishing a reading program in the Department of Education and Early Development; establishing a teacher retention working group; and providing for an effective date."

He called Senator Begich to the table.

[10:02:56 AM](#)

At ease

10:03:11 AM

CHAIR HOLLAND reconvened the meeting.

10:03:17 AM

SENATOR TOM BEGICH, speaking as sponsor of SB 8, said he would highlight the complex components of the bill, the need for which was reinforced by the earlier presentation. He said today he would talk about how the continuum works and why it makes sense. In 2019 he started working with Governor Dunleavy and Education Commissioner Johnson to draft legislation that would build on his earlier pre-K bill and also tie that into reading. He was convinced that the connection between pre-K and reading is critical and that support from the department is also critical. He wanted a bill to turn the curve on reading in Alaska and ensure that every child can read at grade level by third grade, a goal shared by all on the committee. The bill is rooted in evidence and research and based on the successes seen in states like Oklahoma, Mississippi, Florida, Tennessee, and Colorado.

SENATOR BEGICH said that to turn the curve, investments in education are necessary today. The results of the investments won't be seen overnight, but they will be seen over time. It all starts with prekindergarten. Universal, voluntary pre-K has the ability to change lives. Research shows that the greatest improvements for pre-K students are amongst those who are economically disadvantaged and dual language learners. Over 100 languages are spoken in his Anchorage district alone. Throughout rural Alaska and in the state, many students are dual language learners. This disproportionately impacts the poorest populations in both rural and urban areas.

10:06:17 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said that establishing universal, voluntary pre-K across Alaska will have significant and lasting impact for children. The research is clear. Pre-K without continued investments in evidence-based reading instruction does not work, and the state will not see gains from high-quality pre-K without substantial reading instruction. Both are required and must work side-by-side.

SENATOR BEGICH noted that he provided the research the committee has asked for. This includes the Alaska pre-elementary research compilation and the multigenerational Perry Preschool study. This shows four key outcomes: fewer teen pregnancies, higher likelihood of high school graduation, higher likelihood of holding a job with higher earnings, and less likelihood of

needing state support programs. He highlighted a document that includes the Perry Preschool and also the Carolina Abecedarian Project. The committee packet contains many other reports on the effect of universal pre-K. He noted that some of these studies were referenced in the earlier presentation.

10:08:42 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said that from his perspective the pre-K element was key, but the learning process in working with the governor, commissioner, and superintendents has helped him understand the full relationship between the reading component, the pre-K component, and the support for teachers, which was emphasized in the prior presentation, to ensure that they can do the job they are being asked to do. Practically, this means the fiscal notes will look different. The pre-K early education program is a high-quality program to prepare students for reading readiness, allowing students to enter kindergarten armed with the knowledge and tools for future academic success.

SENATOR BEGICH said studies the state has done show that when this pre-K was provided, whether in Nome or Mat-Su, it has always led to greater achievement by third grade and those achievements hold by eighth grade. That pre-K experience is limited in Alaska. Thirty-five school districts offer some level of pre-K through state and federal grants. SB 8 takes away that uncertainty and gives every school district opportunity to join or not join a pre-K program. It is voluntary and only for four- and five-year-olds. It does not compete with the 17 Head Start programs in Alaska. It holds them harmless and ensures local control of pre-K programs. It sets universal standards but control remains at the local level.

SENATOR BEGICH said a crucial element of the bill is the investment to prepare teachers. The Perry Preschool study says that high-quality preschool can save up to \$7 [for every dollar spent] in long-term government expense by reducing the need of remedial education, involvement in the criminal justice system, and public assistance programs. He asked, "If we don't offer opportunity to our kids, what are we doing with our educational system?"

10:11:35 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said SB 8 offers school districts the ability to develop high quality, early education programs that are culturally appropriate and tailored to the students through a three-year grants process based on Alaska's current, successful pre-K efforts. In year one the lowest 10 percent of school

districts, the first cohort, would be eligible to apply for the three-year grants. The second cohort would begin in year two, and the third cohort in year three, etc. The program is spread over six years to reduce the impact and focus on where the need is greatest. It is an eased-in process that is also a terminal process. After every district has been offered the opportunity [to develop a pre-K], the grant program terminates.

SENATOR BEGICH said that during the three years of the grant program, the districts will work on developing programs with high quality elements. Those are detailed in the bill. Early education capacity will systemically be built in those lowest performing school districts with limited or no pre-K. Pre-K potentially could reach virtually every student in the state. He stressed that pre-K will be voluntary and high quality. No one is forced in this bill to put a child in pre-K.

SENATOR BEGICH said that the fiscal note is higher because it reflects every district taking advantage of this program, although not every district will take part in the program. The districts that have a pre-K program that the department will sign off on will count pre-K students as one half of an ADM, Average Daily Membership. They will count as half of a student. DEED must certify that the pre-K program meets the highest standards.

10:14:26 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said the second part of the bill is about parental and local control in the process of helping children learn to read. He and Senator Hughes both share this desire to make reading work for kids. They have been working on this issue and came to the same conclusion from different angles. They want to improve the lives of children. The two components of the reading program are the intervention services and the reading program. The earlier presentation showed that assessments early-on make a difference in reading. Those assessments must come with an individual reading program for each student to respond to reading deficiencies. Parents and classroom teachers are engaged in that process. The state lays out the best practices based on science. The teachers and parents figure out how to use those so a child can read by third grade. These two components are key to successful outcomes by eighth grade and by graduation. It will take years to see the outcomes, but some will be seen fairly soon. Pre-K data from the state shows that.

10:16:23 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said teachers must be prepared to do their jobs. This is the component that the governor and commissioner stressed with him. It is a piece that he had missed. The state should provide support for reading programs for districts, which it is required to do by the constitution and law. Up to 10 struggling schools in this bill can apply for an on-the-ground reading interventionist who will come from the state. That specialist will be present in the school district for a year to train up the workforce. The research-based reading instruction is focused on the five components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, comprehension, and reading fluency. Reading specialists train teachers, model evidence-based reading instruction, convene community gatherings, and provide reading interventions for struggling students. DEED reading intervention specialists funded with a five-year federal grant will also support existing school staff, engage and build community understanding of the evidence-based reading programs, and work with local teachers and support staff to improve reading scores.

10:17:50 AM

SENATOR BEGICH said it is a continuum. No one component can do it alone. Both pre-K and a good reading program are necessary. The evidence in North Carolina and Tennessee underscores that. Those studies are in the documentation he provided. Pre-K alone would fail just as reading without supports to train teachers how to teach reading or without ensuring that kids come prepared to understand the reading instruction would also fail.

SENATOR BEGICH said that is why he, the governor, and the commissioner wrote their principles on a board almost a year and a half ago to combine these things. It costs money to do this. That resource is something the legislature has been talking about this year, but this senate will support a lot of different ideas but very few will potentially transform the entire population of the state. Legislators have talked about education being transformative. The leadership on this committee represents a vision of education in this body. That vision should be comprehensive. SB 8 and SB 42 underscore that. These are comprehensive approaches that are designed to transform education.

CHAIR HOLLAND suggested presenting the sectional at a different time to allow for testimony.

SENATOR BEGICH expressed his preference to hear from the invited guests.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Commissioner Johnson to comment on SB 8.

10:20:51 AM

MICHAEL JOHNSON, Ph.D., Commissioner, Department of Education and Early Development, Juneau, Alaska, thanked the committee for working together on reading legislation. They have been working on this for a number of years. They do not need a bill that makes a statement. They need a bill that makes a change. If they believe reading is that important, then there is no state in this country that needs to be more aggressive in facing their problems because the outcomes are so low. Every moment the committee spends on this issue is important. Several years ago the State Board of Education endorsed that kind of aggressive approach by making it the number one priority in the Alaska Education Challenge. SB 8 and SB 42 both have three parts. Some students don't arrive at kindergarten ready to learn how to read and need prekindergarten supports. Some need in-school pre-K, some need supports such as from Parents as Teachers. Some may not need any of those and have access to literacy opportunities at home. That is why it is voluntary. If the state invests a lot in pre-K, the state has to invest in programs of quality and must follow it up with evidence-based practice and accountability. Some schools need intensive supports in order to provide quality learning programs. Yesterday the country landed another rover on Mars. As he watched the team celebrate on TV, he thought that all of the many team members had learned to read, and probably by third grade. He hopes that all of them could work together on a bill that makes change so that every student in the state can know what it is like to celebrate that kind of achievement. It begins with learning to read.

10:25:12 AM

SENATOR STEVENS commented that the commissioner is right; change is required because the state has such problems. He asked where the state is succeeding in pre-K.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that some great things are happening across the state. Many districts have implemented quality pre-K programs. The state board adopted new Alaska Early Learning Guidelines to support quality pre-K. The department is trying to move forward as the legislature works on a bill. Some districts have district-supported programs. There are Head Start programs and some private early learning programs. There are programs such as Best Beginnings. Through some of the settlement agreements, studies have been done on impacts of pre-K on some of the rural districts, namely Lower Kuskokwim. That can be

provided to the committee. Targeted pre-K programs do help students arrive at kindergarten ready to learn to be on the trajectory of reading proficiency by the end of third grade. Even in the last few months, elevating this conversation has resulted in some districts focusing resources and attention on developing strong K-3 reading programs.

CHAIR HOLLAND reported that 35 of 54 districts offer some pre-K. He asked the commissioner how many schools offer pre-K.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON replied he would follow up with the information.

SENATOR BEGICH estimated that about 10 percent of kids who would be eligible are currently in some form of a pre-K program.

COMMISSIONER JOHNSON responded that it depends on what type of pre-K is included in that statistic.

SENATOR BEGICH said he stresses the quality of pre-K because there can be haphazard pre-K programs. The governor asked him from day one what he meant by pre-K and he replied quality pre-K with evidence that it is doing what it says. That is why he and the governor were able to come to common ground.

[10:29:15 AM](#)

At ease

[10:29:58 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND asked the remaining invited testifiers to speak at another meeting. He held SB 8 in committee.

[10:30:35 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 10:30 a.m.